

The Consolidation of the Crofting System

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ONE of the most notable results, perhaps, of local study has been to modify conceptions, long held, of a concerted advance, through the centuries and over Britain as a whole, towards a system of large farms, run by men of capital and manned by a numerically predominant wage-earning labour force; and of the progressive thinning of the rural population to fit the needs of efficient cultivation. Here and there have emerged discrepant areas—areas of a continuing small peasant system, of overpopulation, of mixing of occupations. And one of the tasks of agrarian history must be to disentangle the forces that have produced such oddity within the broad trend. Apart from Ireland, the best known of these areas is the Highlands of Scotland, where there persists, in the form of the crofting system, a society cast in the mould of the early eighteenth century. In this article I propose to discuss the reasons for the divergent agrarian development of the area.

The present distinction between Highlands and Lowlands is not only that between a commercialized, and largely industrial and urban, society on the one hand, and its rural opposite, without towns or industries, on the other. There are also important differences in the strictly rural organization of Highlands and Lowlands. In the former zone, a very high proportion of the population has in one way or another access to land, although only as tenants or subtenants (for the ownership of land within the Highlands has always been aristocratic and highly concentrated). Partly as a consequence of the broad dispersion of rights to land, holdings are generally, by all modern standards, very small, too small to provide full subsistence from the land. Again in the Highland townships proper there is no rural middle class, no significant number of farmers with more than the basic modicum of land. With holdings so small, most of the holders of land, along with their families, are forced to pursue a number of occupations, some of them locally, but some involving considerable periods of absence and perhaps lengthy journeyings. The croft, in fact, is a centre for a family of diverse interests rather than a simple unit of economic operation. And lastly the arable land has, until very recently, been cultivated entirely to produce a subsistence crop; even an area so well adapted to animal husbandry has not developed genuine mixed

farming, and the arable has not been used to any extent to support the rearing of stock, the cash element in the system.

This system of organization does not obtain all over the area geologically defined as Highland (that is over all the land north and west of the Highland line, which runs transversely from south-west to north-east and virtually bisects Scotland). For over the easterly coastal lands, even to the far north, the system conforms, and prosperously, to that of the rural Lowlands; the eastern slopes of the mountain massif, and westward as far as the main watershed, support in the main a system of substantial peasant farming; and the whole of the Highland area is interspersed with large sheep farms. Yet within shrunken geographical limits—along the western coast as it extends north of the Caledonian Canal and through the islands to the north and west of Mull—the crofting system remains compactly organized and undiluted; the sheep farms which lie adjacent to the crofting townships scarcely affect their working except by constriction of bounds¹ and the greater peasant or capitalist farming classes have obtained little hold on the arable land of this north-westerly zone. Crofting may be studied, then, as a coherent and virtually unalloyed social system, with only occasional reference to the big sheep farms lying adjacent, and study should be capable, given the records, of isolating the formative forces. They may be local to the place and particular to the time, but laid alongside the case studies of other areas they may help towards broader conclusions.

I

If it is tempting to see the distinctive Highland system as archaic, or backward, it is easy to explain its persistence in terms of a lag established in the days of isolation and turbulence; the relatively slow development of the Highland agrarian system—if that is the diagnosis—will, in that case, have its roots in two levels of development already relatively fixed in 1745. But this easy theory scarcely stands up to more detailed examination. In fact the decisive period of separate crystallization seems to have been the century following the pacification, precisely the period when age-old isolation and lawlessness were vanishing. In 1750 the economies and agrarian systems of Highlands and Lowlands did not show to contemporaries the monstrous

¹ The conflict between croft and sheep farm is, of course, one of the main themes of Highland history. But the extent to which sheep farmers took over land previously occupied by the small tenantry is scarcely relevant to the present discussion. The important facts are that sheep-farming did not stimulate fresh agrarian adaptations within the peasant sphere (except perhaps by accentuating the existing dominant characteristic of the small peasant system—crowding on the land), and did not suck in local labour to any degree.

contrast between apparent stagnation and undoubted progress that they did a century later. In field arrangements,¹ in size of holdings, in methods of husbandry,² in occupational structure, Highlands and Lowlands were at the earlier date recognizable parts of a single uniform order; the differences were differences of balance rather than of essence. But by 1850, on almost every point by which economic historians seek to define agrarian systems, there was contrast: in the Highlands were to be found now tiny holdings, no wage-earning class, universal access to land, purely subsistence cultivation, mixing of occupations, unchanging techniques; in the Lowlands the growing domination of the rural middle class, large farms (or the intermixture of large and small on a graduated scale), a wage-earning class almost landless, commercial purpose, the gospel of economic efficiency to replace that of social conservatism, the complete specialization of occupation. This had followed a hundred years of complete political control from the country's capital, from the Lowlands; the small peasant system was consolidating in the north-west precisely when the isolation of the area and its social and administrative autonomy were vanishing. Nor is the widening gap to be explained by Highland stagnation at the time of the Lowlands' most rapid development. Indeed, in the Highlands, as in the Lowlands, it was a time of unprecedented change. A population rapidly on the increase, an old field system suddenly overthrown,³ a new basic subsistence crop—the potato—established over the greater part of the land,⁴ the rearrangement of the land as between large and small farmers, the rise and decline of at least two major industries (kelp-making⁵ and linen-spinning), the extensive migration

¹ The runrig system obtained both in Highlands and Lowlands, although not identically; the pastoral component was, of course, greater in the Highlands and 'periodic' runrig (with re-assignment of strips) was still common while in the Lowlands it had widely given way to fixity of individual tenure.

² One major difference was the use in parts of the Highlands of the cas-chrom (a type of spade) rather than the plough; but this was a distinction that time was to accentuate as the cas-chrom lingered in certain populous Highland areas while the Lowlands developed new implements of cultivation.

³ This was the time when the crofts, compact arable holdings, were laid in place of the mangle-mangle of the runrig farms. For a fuller discussion of the nature and results of the process see M. Gray, 'The Abolition of Runrig', *Economic History Review*, Second Series, v, 1952, pp. 46-57.

⁴ On the general adoption of the potato see R. N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, Cambridge, 1949, pp. 364-70.

⁵ Kelp was an alkaline extract of seaweed, manufactured by burning great masses of the weed in rough open kilns. From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards it commanded an increasing price, being used in the manufacture of soap and glass. To make it was a laborious, seasonal, and largely unskilled activity, and production was tied to the coasts where the seaweed was abundantly to be found. In the social and geographical conditions of the north-

of labour both within and from the area as a whole: the broad magnitudes of rural life were altering their balance even if many of the minutiae seem to have been set fast.

Such change was no doubt partly a matter of manifold peasant response to industrial opportunity, new agricultural products, fluctuating prices, and an extending horizon; but also there was conscious, and powerful, drive in the energetic experimentalism of a small group—the landlords. In many ways, they moved against the general feeling of peasant society, but they had a power, built into the land system, that was hard to blunt. For the control of landed property was in 1750, and remained thereafter, highly concentrated, and in all the Highland counties a group of less than a dozen landowners controlled the greater part of the land area. Of peasant ownership there was none. Moreover, the great mass of the farmers held their land at will; the law would give no protection against a landlord who wished completely to re-organize the tenancies of his estate. It is true that a portion, sometimes considerable, of the land was in the hands of a lesser hereditary aristocracy, the tacksmen, men who (as collateral relations of the landowners) received their lands on tack (or lease) at long or medium term; but even such men were on the expiry of their leases powerless before the landlord. Many of them indeed had to accept eviction, increased rent, or a diminished sphere of interest in the impending period of change; some were to leave the country, leading the first great emigration movement.

What gave this landlord right its peculiar force after 1750 was the dogmatic addiction of the class to the tenets of the eighteenth-century improving and progressive creed—an addiction somewhat tempered, it is true, by lingering patriarchal sentiments. Men of such outlook found little to their taste in the Highland scene of the time. Privileges of birth tied up a good deal of the land, away from direct landlord control, under men of little agricultural expertise and less ambition. And, even worse, the granting of minute holdings to a numerous population held down a population admittedly too great for the land, and pulverized the land into units too small for systematic cultivation. Here, then, were the attitudes of reform and the power to change that might have been expected speedily to sweep away an old and abhorred system. But there was a counterpoise to reforming energy, and distractions to turn even the landlord from the orthodox aims of progress. In fact, a main theme in the development of our area in the century under discussion is the

west Highlands and of many of the islands, then, production continued to expand through the period of rising prices till the peak was reached about 1810. After 1815, however, prices collapsed and the industry entered a period of decline. See M. Gray, 'The Kelp Industry in the Highlands and Islands', *Economic History Review*, Second Series, IV, 1951, pp. 197-209.

struggle between the apostles of progress—the landlords—and a recalcitrant and back-sliding tenantry. No group can have absolute power over the basic forms of society, and even a reforming Highland landlord of the eighteenth century had to work within a framework which he must take as given and fixed rather than as personally controllable.

The most obtrusive and implacable of the social facts which confronted the reforming landlord was the existence, typically, of a large population on a restricted arable surface.¹ Thus, in the north-west, there would not usually be more than two arable acres worked for each family, and in some districts the average would be down to one to each family.² Moreover, this population was so disposed as to allow nearly every family some land to cultivate as its own; while there were servants—more numerous than a hundred years later—all of them mixed labouring for others with work on the personal holding. The result was a minute parcellation of land that rendered the inadequacy of subsistence all the graver. Whatever the past trends and the present justifications of the system, it challenged the agricultural improver—and therefore the landlords—on the subjects nearest the heart. Holdings arranged in this way could scarcely be worked in accord with the most advanced prescriptions; any improved cultivation of the soil must, it was generally agreed, start with the laying of larger holdings and, presumably, the diminution of the dependent population. Yet landlords were divided in their minds—apart from the acceptance of *force majeure*—on accepting any rigorous depopulating prescription. A large population was the material of an industrial labour force which, at a time of industrial exploration even of this remote fringe, might be turned to good advantage; and few in the eighteenth century could think of a large, or an increasing, population as a bad thing. The landlord had to balance the claims of purely agricultural necessity against the general predilections of the political economy of the time, while

¹ Whether this constituted true land scarcity is doubtful; it is at least arguable that it was not shortage of potential arable land that held down production per head. The smallness of the holdings may, in fact, have been due to other factors than mere scarcity: for example, to gregariousness (or the necessities of defence) which would collect people closely on one arable patch while other scattered, and potentially equally good, patches were left, to the general adoption of household and industrial techniques that used up so much labour power that little time was left to cultivate any substantial area of land, or to agricultural technique (the use of the *cas-chrom*) which kept the agricultural range of the individual family within narrow bounds. What is certain is that all agricultural improvers looked to the broadening of holdings by decrease of population, by extension of the margin of cultivation, or by use of more effective implements and concentration on agricultural tasks—a programme which, if physically feasible, would have to bear away a great weight of social conservatism and inertia.

² See, particularly, the details of estate layout given in several volumes of the *Forfeited Estates Papers*.

perhaps casting back a thought to the days of patriarchal glory when a long tail of followers was the essence of power and prestige. Into this crowded social scene there was injected, through the succeeding century, a general, and sometimes dramatic, increase of population. With rising physical productivity (per acre and perhaps per man), a death-rate probably falling (through inoculation against smallpox), rising money incomes, and a land policy that made holdings readily available, most of the parishes of the north-west were to see their population doubled before 1850, and, in some, numbers were to increase threefold. This demographic trend fitted into the agrarian order—whether as cause or effect—by the multiplication of holdings, to such a degree that the increased numbers of families were all accommodated on separate holdings of one sort or another.¹ Why holdings were allowed to increase in number on a restricted land surface at a time when improving dogma pointed to consolidation and diminution of numbers is perhaps the most pregnant question that we could ask about the period; certainly the answer must contain some essential clues to the problem of Highland eccentricity.

But the Highland economy was not, even in the earlier eighteenth century, a simple subsistence system, and welfare and development depended on factors other than the physical product of the land and the numbers of people who must depend on that product. It had also an important commercial, or money, component, and the drift of prices—which also the landlords had to accept as an external fact—would presumably affect immediate standards and future possibilities of growth, in helping to determine population trend, the extent to which land might be subdivided, occupational grouping, and technical exploration. The peasant's need for money and the importance to him of fluctuations in his money takings arose for three main reasons. He paid for his land by a money rent; he must purchase certain raw materials (such as timber and iron) out of which he manufactured both consumption and capital goods;² and frequently he must purchase food (in the

¹ Not all families were accommodated as direct tenants or on official holdings; in fact the proportion of direct holdings to all families, about 1850, varied in north-westerly parishes between 30 and 70 per cent, the remainder obtaining their land as subtenants (or cottars). But the number of direct holdings (i.e. holdings created by direct action of the landlord) increased at least proportionately to the general increase of population. In about half the parishes of the north-west the number of such holdings in 1850 was greater than had been the total number of families a century before. See M. Gray, *The Highland Economy, 1750-1850*, Edinburgh, 1956, Table X.

² To this list might be added the purchase of a few already manufactured goods (from the Lowlands). In the main, however, the Highland peasant either made himself, or employed local semi-specialized labour (often on barter terms) to make not only his clothes and articles of household use, but also the ploughs, boats, mills, and cottages that formed the rudimentary

form of meal) to make up for the deficiencies of the arable patch.¹ Thus, any change in his money income fitted into the welfare and demographic picture in complicated fashion. An increase might be skimmed off in increased rent; or it might be taken out in more varied and plentiful consumption goods; or holdings might be made smaller, the tenants living more by purchased food and less by their own subsistence efforts.

Thus, one of the paramount facts of Highland development—and of the situation to which landlords had to adapt their policies—was the rise in prices, and consequently in peasant incomes, that held till about 1815. The main source of income was traditionally the sale of cattle, and cattle prices about trebled in the second half of the eighteenth century,² while the price of meal, the main commodity to be purchased by the Highland peasant, remained more or less steady; on the central nexus of exchange the Highland economy was undoubtedly gaining till about 1815. In addition, during this time the steep rise in the price of kelp—the seaweed product that, given only an adequate labour force, could so well be produced along great parts of the western seaboard—opened to the peasant the possibility of adding to his income by industrial work over a short summer season. Linen-spinning also was expanding, but scarcely reached the north-west coast as a significant activity. Fishing, on the other hand, was an age-old and already commercialized peasant occupation, and, on the whole, while prices remained steady, total output seems to have been slightly on the increase through the second half of the century. All this added up to an almost dramatic increase in the returns from Highland produce sent to Lowland markets and, consequently, to an extension of the capacity of the Highland economy as a whole to purchase the materials, foods, and commodities on which welfare and growth depended. In fact, as we have seen, population was growing, but neither the individual size of the holding nor the subsistence product available to each family seems to have diminished; although there may have been some slight decrease in average stocks of cattle. Increased money income capital equipment of his technology; but there was scarcity of crucial raw materials, particularly timber.

¹ Most Highland districts were steady net importers of meal from distant parts, sometimes up to half of the required subsistence being purchased in this way; but a few parishes might reach self-sufficiency in the better years, and in the odd case (such as Kilmuir in Skye) there might be a surplus to distribute in surrounding regions. See, particularly, amid other evidence, the parish reports in the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1790–8.

² Cattle prices are particularly difficult to handle owing to local differences, short-term fluctuations, doubts about the age and type of animals listed, etc., but there is sufficient statistical fullness to justify firm generalization. See *Commissary Court Records* and the *Old Statistical Account*. For meal the evidence is much thinner, but all tends to the conclusion that there was no dramatic change in the period.

went, then, partly in greater dependence on purchased rather than home-manufactured goods; but much more notably, by a rise of rents more than proportionate to the increase of incomes, a larger share of total money income was diverted to the pockets of the landlords: almost the whole of the peasant's money income, as derived from the land, was handed over in rent, while the peasant drew his food more completely by the simple subsistence cultivation of his patch.¹ The years after 1815 were to tell a different tale. Agricultural prices dropped and the kelp industry was virtually destroyed. But the drop in income did not restore the pre-inflationary situation. Population was irrevocably greater than it had been in 1750, and landlords, thinking that bad times were but temporary, held their rentals at or near the top levels. The result was peasant debt and a great wastage of capital—by selling of cattle—which reduced nearly all peasants to the basic minimum of stock. Any consolidation of holdings was ruled out not only by land scarcity but also by shortage of the capital necessary to stock larger holdings.²

A third set of facts that the landlord had to accept was peasant response to schemes of land rearrangement, to the unfolding possibilities of improved cultivation, and to specific admonitions. On the whole, perhaps because of the mere fact of distance, the farmer of the north-west showed much less inclination to desert his traditional land for the gains of the Lowlands than did his like in the southern and eastern parts of the Highlands;³ consequently the gentle reliefs of voluntary migration were denied in the former area and any consolidation of holdings was the more difficult. By universal testimony, too, the tenant of the north-west was more conservative in his methods of cultivation; while turnips, artificial grasses, and many of the prescriptions of the improver were commonly adopted even by the smaller tenants, say, of Perthshire, they remained unknown among the crofters further north and west. But perhaps it would be unjust to call the north-western Highlander simply blind or obstinate. His preoccupations were different—simple subsistence yield rather than the greater cash product that might be removed by the landlord—and his holding was miserably small

¹ There were still, of course, wide purchases of meal; but they were paid for often by money earned in industrial by-employments, particularly kelping.

² This, for example, was the unanimous testimony of the witnesses examined by Sir John M'Neill before making his *Report to the Board of Supervision on the Western Highlands and Islands*, 1851.

³ There was considerable net migration from all Highland counties to other parts of Scotland in the half century before 1850; but this rate was significantly greater from Argyllshire than from the more northerly Highland counties. Correspondingly, the figures of population increase are more dramatic in almost all north-westerly parishes than in most of the parishes of the more southerly and more easterly Highlands. See *Census Report* for 1851.

for any experiment. Even the landlord enthusiastic about the lore of improvement found it hard to pass his enthusiasm on to the men who mattered in this respect—the working farmers themselves. One capital fact, however, represents rapid peasant adaptation—the general adoption, from 1750 onwards, of the potato as the main food crop. It was a crop temporarily satisfactory, perhaps, in increasing the food yield of small holdings, but which also set in train, or accelerated, demographic reactions that would render agrarian reform all the harder.

II

These, then, are the main facts which landlords had to accept and to which they must adapt their devices—overcrowding on the land, increase of population, fluctuations of money income, and peasant conservatism, mitigated by alacrity in adopting the potato. Their problem was how to adapt the dogmas handed to them by the articulate social thought of the time to the objective and inescapable local situation. Here, three main themes of policy may be picked out of the complex system of ideas of agrarian betterment which was the orthodoxy of the time: the determined destruction of the old field system with its scattered strips and division into infield and outfield; the attempt to lay holdings in desirable sizes (which raised the problem, generally, of how to deal with the superfluous tenants); and finally the stimulation of diverse industrial pursuits and the separation of the occupations of agriculture from those of industry. If this was a programme—enclosure, consolidation, and specialization—it is as interesting in showing how far performance fell short of, or even diverged in direction from, theoretical desiderata as in sketching any ultimately achieved social reality. Analysis of the reasons for this divergence will show how the conditions of the Highlands could distort a programme elsewhere achievable.

The first theme—the destruction of the old runrig farms—is simple both in conception and result. It represented a straight line of policy energetically pursued and it created the physical form of the croft as we know it today. There were no doubts in the minds of landlords about the true dictates of progress here and little that could stand against the achievement of their programme (even if the tenants themselves were much attached to older forms of organization). Thus, in the course of about eighty years—between 1770 and 1850—an age-old and highly uniform system of farm arrangement, the runrig system, was swept away throughout the Highlands, to be replaced by the townships as we know them today. Again the superficial form was surprisingly uniform from place to place—the clustered array of compact holdings surrounded by the hill grazing, which remained undivided

common, allocated on a system of stints. Only one comment need be added. This, of course, was a form of enclosure, the gathering together of scattered arable strips in compact blocks; but it was seldom followed by physical delimitation between croft and croft. The arable remained open ground and many of the indiscriminate pasture arrangements of the old township were retained. The abolition of runrig did not mean any sudden jump in methods of husbandry.

The second theme—that of the size arrangements of the holdings—was again, or so it might seem, wholly under the control of the landlords; the Highland landlord could, for all the law had to say, rank and shape his holdings as he might wish. And the instructions of the improver seemed to be quite unequivocal. The importance of capital as a social agent was never far from the eighteenth-century mind, and the improving discussion generally ran in terms of handing over the land to men of capital, men who would organize on it an efficient wage-earning force accurately fitted in numbers to full productive necessities. It was almost a truism that only thus could energy and initiative be found, only thus the labour force set efficiently to work, and only thus the funds found for the equipment of the farm and the permanent improvement of the soil. Yet the landlords' responses to the challenges of situation and thought were by no means firm and unequivocal, and the results were often opposed outright to all that agrarian reformers had to say. The interests and the obstructions that produced this wavering are the sum of the local peculiarities which, in the general march of the time, turned the direction of Highland development.

First, farms of even moderate size would be achieved only by tearing apart the existing social system. There had been no continuing movement through the centuries (as in England) to produce even the beginnings of a class of substantial well-to-do farmers, the men who alone could stock and run such farms; and while every family clung grimly to its land as of ancient right, even individual wage-earners of the landless sort were difficult to find. Further, agrarian rationalization demanded not only that the number of independent holders of land be reduced—a task in itself hard enough—but also that the total rural population be thinned.¹ Nothing short of forcible eviction was

¹ The only painless way of creating larger farms was to extend the arable area to support the existing population more thinly dispersed (even then, if the farms were to be of any size, a wage-earning force must be found), and some seized on this possibility as the solution. The extent of possible arable cultivation in the Highlands has always been doubtful and in the eighteenth century was often optimistically estimated. But at best this could only be a solution over long term and it did not overcome the difficulty that no employing class offered itself. The Highland landlords of the eighteenth century, partly for financial reasons, were generally immersed in immediate problems and could not afford too long a view.

likely to move a population as devoted to traditional homes as was this. Even widening economic opportunity in the Lowlands and the knowledge of that opportunity that must have been carried back by seasonal migrants would not pull the surplus off the land. In short, the opposition of the small peasant system to capitalist encroachment was accentuated by Highland geographical and social conditions; while the rival and growing system had the strength only of theoretical authoritarian support (and that not always wholehearted). In fact, then, within our area eviction and consolidation were confined to the land taken over by sheepfarmers, a conversion which itself added to the crowding on the lower arable ground. A less outright policy of consolidation was, it is true, sometimes mooted: it was to create the holdings that would give each landholding family an adequate livelihood solely from full-time cultivation of the farm and without use of hired labour. Even this implied eviction and would have had to bear down much peasant opposition. However, in the south and east, in Argyllshire, Perthshire, and parts of Invernessshire, such a peasant system slowly grew; but this was in a land system more relaxed than that of the north-west: the land here had never been so crowded, population was not increasing to the same extent, labour was more willing to move to work permanently in the Lowlands.¹ The root facts, in the north-west, were that consolidation even of moderate sort, to build up fully independent peasant holdings, could be achieved only by brutal clearance. Not only was the land as it stood overcrowded, but also people clung desperately to the slight independence of their tiny holdings; no work was available locally to seep up labour cast adrift from the land; population was increasing rapidly; the spread of sheep-farming was congesting the remaining arable; and, while local capital was lacking, arable farming in the Highlands was not sufficiently profitable to attract outside capital and men (as did sheep-farming).

All this might have been sufficient in itself to damp the reformer's ardour and to reduce any landlord to acceptance of the old smallholding system. But also there were more positive enticements to confuse policy. The possibilities of industrial development were a preoccupation not altogether delusive and not without genuine hope of profit; and the encouragement and arrangement of subsidiary industries tended to obliterate the interest in land reform, but in ways that were themselves pertinent to the organization of farming. In the wide and continuous discussion of industrial potentiality that filled so much of the later part of the eighteenth century, nothing is so striking to the modern student as the fact that the industrial backwardness of the Highlands was not yet accepted as inevitable or even likely. Land-

¹ See above, p. 38.

lords were particularly interested in this discussion because in industrial expansion they might look for some relief to their pressing land problems; labour surplus to the needs of the soil would be absorbed in purely industrial employment. The orthodox aim was the separation of the industrial from the agricultural labour force, and some experiments were made in the nearer Highlands in setting up villages in which an industrial working class would prosper in symbiosis with a productive countryside. But this was not to be the directing idea in the north-west; here it was that of the peasant remaining on his land and working at subsidiary industry to add to his earnings and increase the rentable capacity of the estate. Thus could a large population be prosperously employed, and with advantage to the landlord; and so does the large and growing population—even a population growing at the expense of agricultural efficiency—creep back as the respectable aim of policy. At the extreme, land becomes the instrument for accommodating as large an industrial population as possible, not a productive agent to be used with careful economy. Most notoriously effective in this way was the kelp industry, an industry which produced the maximum of industrial temptation and diversionary interest for the landlords. A seasonal occupation, requiring little skill and no equipment, it could be combined with the working of land in traditional ways. To allow the kelpers land was an advantage to the landlord (who was also industrial employer), for thus they could grow their own subsistence and at the same time pay some money rent from the sale of cattle. And from the kelping itself the landlord stood to gain in two ways: because of wage-receipts,¹ he increased the rent he could draw from the tenant, but, much more important, there were very large entrepreneurial gains to be made from the sale of kelp made by estate labour. As kelp prices rose—without corresponding increase in costs—towards the peak of 1810-11, so did financial self-interest become the more compulsive. For a handful of kelp magnates rents came to be but a small proportion of their total gains (which might run between £10,000 and £20,000).² A much greater number of proprietors of land—perhaps the majority of those with seaboard estates—were in it in a smaller way, and the same motives operated, if less powerfully. Possibly a majority, then, of landlords—and particularly those with the largest estates—were swung by self-interest to the policy of crowding their

¹ These wages, of course, represented costs to the landlord as industrial entrepreneur, but, even so regarded, their return as increased rent meant that the employer was selling a product he had obtained virtually without cost. And even if wages be reckoned as a full cost there was still a margin of about £15 on each ton when at the peak kelp was being sold at about £20 per ton; the greatest kelp landlords would sell each over 1,000 tons in a year.

² About half a dozen landlords were dealing with over 500 tons a year, the greatest with about 1,500.

land and of subdividing rather than consolidating their holdings. Not only the demography but also the agrarian layout of the north-west was to be permanently, perhaps decisively, affected by the rapid growth of this industry. Preoccupation with fishing may have had something of a similar effect, if in a more diffused and gentle way. Even though the eventual aim might be to produce specialized communities of fishers, the first step was to lay out the holdings that would support them till the industry became fully viable. Designedly they were smallholdings, and they had permanently to be accepted as standard agricultural units, for not only would consolidation of holdings, once laid, be difficult, but also the faltering fluctuations of fishing as an industry prevented any specialized industrial growth.

The force of this conjunction—of the general approbation of an increasing population, of lingering patriarchal feeling, of positive industrial advantage in a large smallholding population, and of the social conservatism of the peasantry—was to commit the landlords to the support of the existing smallholding system. Agrarian reform and agricultural improvement were weak ideas to set against the decisive combination of social facts and financial interests. Thus, the drift of opinion and interest worked into policy in three main ways. First, the number of official holdings was not only maintained but increased; rent-rolls of 1850 when compared with the population figures of a century before leave little doubt that in most cases there must have been at least twice as many full and recognized holdings at the later date.¹ They could have come into existence only with deliberate landlord encouragement. But they were not necessarily carved out of existing holdings. Study of the fragmentary evidence of size of holding in 1750 set against the fuller knowledge of the holdings of the larger population of 1850 suggests that the arable area as well as the population must have been extended,² and we read explicitly on occasions of the laying out of entirely new settlements. There may have been creations of new holdings going on fairly continuously—we do not know—but the main occasion and opportunity for the laying of new holdings would be the rearrangement following the break-up of the runrig farms; sometimes at this point of estate development the whole existing cottar and subtenant population would be offered full holdings.³ Secondly, on this occasion of the overturn of old arrangements, not too much attention

¹ This estimate is based on the population figures in *Dr Webster's Enumeration* (1755) and the average family is assumed to consist of five members; in addition it is taken—as is suggested by all available records—that less than half the population of that date would have the full status of membership of joint farms (whether or not the farms were held directly from the landlord, or indirectly through a tacksman).—Numbers of holdings in 1850 as given in Sir John M'Neill, *op. cit.*, Appendix A.

² See below, p. 44, n. 1.

³ As, apparently, on the Gairloch Estate.

was paid to the status of the tenants of the old farms. Maximum accommodation for the tenantry could be achieved only by shaving down all holdings to a standard, a reasonable minimum. Thus, though there may be doubt whether the average size of the holding changed as between 1750 and 1850,¹ there can be none that many of the peasants formerly of greater consequence than the average were shorn of their exceptional status; conditions among the peasantry became more equal—as far as formal size of holding went—than they had been. The usual pattern within the new crofting townships was to be that of the array of rigidly stereotyped holdings, not of a differentiated system giving opportunity to men of all grades. In fact, levelling was at first deliberate, though later in the nineteenth century, when opinion had turned against such a system, it was to be further enforced by lack of peasant capital. Thirdly, the control of landlords over subdivision and subtenancy, a continuing process, was extremely lax, at least until 1820. The preoccupation of administrators and landlords with the existence of a large class of subtenants or cottars becomes strongest in the third decade of the nineteenth century. But the class itself was no new thing; it had probably increased in absolute if not in relative numbers since the eighteenth century, and since many of the cottar holdings were obliterated when the farms were transformed there must have been fairly continuous re-creation of subtenancies.

After 1815 landlords' interests, in tune with the underlying economic situation, began decisively to shift. Overpopulation rather than a declining population became the bogey of the country, and nowhere more so than in the Highlands. For there the retreat of industry left an overcrowded² land for which the tenantry, with the fall in agricultural prices, was unable to pay rents at the existing level. Arrears mounted, the incomes of the landlords dwindled even as kelp profits disappeared; and finally recurrent famines created need for direct aid by the landlords, a need all the greater for the very numbers involved. The only solution, it was argued, was so to clear the land that more viable holdings might be laid and that there would be no cottar population, unproductive on the land, uncertainly dependent on subsidiary earnings, and constantly in need of aid from the proprietors. Attempts were made, then, to control and limit subtenancy, but the existing cottar classes could scarcely be spirited away without a brutal determination; and

¹ Patchily, in particular in the 'fishing' villages of Wester Ross, land conditions were worse about 1850 than they had been anywhere in the eighteenth century. But the standard croft holdings of the nineteenth century were in arable area (cattle stocks had diminished) certainly no smaller than the average joint tenancies of the runrig farms.

² That is, "overcrowded," both in the sense that the land could not provide full subsistence (or adequate money income) and in the sense that a smaller population might have produced as much (or more) to give the higher output per head necessary for full viability.

any attempt at creating larger holdings failed not only because of land scarcity but also because there were few peasants with the capital to stock larger holdings.¹ And all the time, at least until 1841, the increase of population went on. Landlords were caught, then, by the errors of their own policies of the later eighteenth century, and congestion and the minute subdivision of the land had to be accepted as facts.

The third of our heads—the separation of occupations, and in particular the separation of the agricultural from the industrial population—finds equally mixed motives and policies equally wavering. The need for this separation was one of the progressive dogmas of the time; yet, as we know, the period was to see the closer tangling of agricultural with other pursuits. The reason for this drift of social facts away from authoritative prescription emerges in part from the confusions of land policy. The major industries of the north-west—kelping and fishing—were such as could best be pursued by men with land; in spite of much theoretical argument for the contrary policy, estates were deliberately laid out to support a part-time industrial labour force. And even when there was no industrial preoccupation the effect of increase of population and fragmentation of land was very much the same; where men had inadequate land on which to live and to occupy the whole family energies, at least some of its members would go out to work, either of financial necessity or of choice, in other fields.

But if the continued mixing of occupations was partly the result of the whole trend of population growth and land arrangement, there were also other factors that would rivet these habits more completely and permanently on Highland society. For while the opportunity to undertake subsidiary occupations was created by physical redundancy of labour, the impulse to do varied work had its roots in monetary need. Incomes had risen till 1815, but rents also had been so screwed up that, even in the inflationary phase, the price of holding land was often to earn labourer's wages. And after 1815 the compulsion to add to basic agricultural income became so much the stronger. The manner of ordinary living was coming to depend somewhat more on purchased goods and less on home manufactures—even if the shift towards the money economy was only on the margins—and agricultural implements, such as the iron plough, were becoming much more objects of specialized workmanship and of imported materials. Individual purchases of

¹ Stocking was largely a matter of building up cattle stocks, which were conventionally larger on the larger arable holdings; but there seems no reason why, given the land, peasants should not have worked larger arable holdings for subsistence (provided the increase did not necessitate the use of the plough rather than the *cas-chrom*). The difficulty, then, was to get any increase of rent from a system of larger holdings.

meal were probably not year by year greater, in proportion to population, than they had been in the eighteenth century, but in the thirties the potato crop on which so much now depended began to show itself a precarious stay and in the years of famine the need for imported meal would be far beyond the ability of the tenants to meet the bill. But the central relationship was that between rents and agricultural prices. The fall in the price of cattle (by about 50 per cent) left the small tenant with an agricultural income totally inadequate to meeting his obligations in rent; and at the same time kelp income was partially cut off.¹ This situation had three consequences. First, the accumulation of arrears sunk the great bulk of the tenantry more or less permanently in debt. They continued to hold their land—debt was so universal that there were none in better pass to take the place of evicted tenants—but under onerous conditions of what amounted to labour service and at the cost of losing control of whatever money income might filter to them. Secondly, tenants were forced to sell their cattle till stocks fell well below the level permitted by local regulation (which was used as the standard in setting rents). The chances of recovery were then the worse, and income from diminished stocks fell further. Thirdly, and most importantly for the present argument, tenants were forced to add to their money income as best they could by outside labour. Such labour, with the decline of kelping and the continued uncertain fluctuation of fishing, generally involved long-distance, if seasonal, migration, an old Highland practice. The traditional direction of movement had been south-eastwards to aid in the Lowland harvest, and some continued to move to this work. But a great new employment field had appeared in the fishing communities of the east coast, in Caithness, along the Moray Firth, and in Aberdeenshire. Here for six weeks around midsummer the local fishermen with their heavy craft, so much better equipped than were the boats of the west coast, would take on numbers of wage-hands; while ashore there was work to be had in carting, gutting, and packing. Altogether several thousands of Highlanders, mainly from the north-western area, moved east in the season. From some parishes as many as, on the average, one member from each family would go; and with these migrants bringing back up to £6 in their pockets, the rewards of

¹ On the smaller estates of the mainland and inner isles kelping was stopped completely and the peasant lost what had never been a predominant part of his income; also not all had been accustomed to earn in this way. In the outer isles, the whole population was engaged, and many in such a way that they earned more from kelping than from farming; in such estates kelping was often kept on as a means of getting something from a tenantry which could not pay in money for the land. Wages did not drop much, but output tailed off, and in any case kelp earnings were all seized by the landlords. In effect the peasantry were earning the use of some land for subsistence cultivation by labour services.

seasonal labour were often, for the crofting family, as great as the monetary rewards of husbandry. It was this, more than anything else, that kept the smallholding system alive.¹ A steady and dependable stream of income did filter through an economy which was threatening, if not to fall into outright dependence on charity, at least to strangle in barter conditions; an unsteady supply of subsistence was derived from a land paid for on nominal labour terms, or sometimes given in exchange for labour in kelping or on the estate—a condition in itself limiting to endeavour, but also precarious in depending partly on purchase of necessities (in the Lowlands) from a money income always unreliable and stretched, whether in the hands of landlord or of tenant. Anything that made the money income steadier would significantly stabilize the economy. If such labouring opportunities helped to rescue the smallholding society, they also perpetuated and strengthened the tradition of seeking work away from the holding.

This article set out to explain a set of economic facts, to explain the organization adopted by a particular group in exploiting the resources of its area, and the argument has been conducted almost solely in economic terms—the play of the market, of existing structures of organization, and of technical potential. Yet simple economic argument will seldom explain even the simplest of economic adaptations. Men in their daily work respond to the depths of their individual and social natures and not merely to the opportunities of resources, techniques, and markets. And nowhere, perhaps, more than among a people whose response is rooted in tradition and whose daily economic life is shot with emotional, and even religious, expression. The explanation of the peculiarities of Highland economic behaviour must lie partly—how much is debatable—in the depths of group temperament; the desperate attachment to land, technical conservatism, the desire to wander and yet to keep an old home, expression in varied activity—these are more than passing obstructions to economic rationality. Yet, if the argument of the previous pages is correct, extra-economic purpose was powerfully aided by certain of the facts of market, technique, and demography; these, the economic facts, must surely be an important part of the whole explanation.

¹ Whether this money went in rent or in direct purchase, it created the funds that would support the steady purchase of the means of subsistence (which would often be provided by the landlords). The extra money might not break the barter system (i.e. of labour, or fish, exchanged for grain) but it made subsistence more secure.